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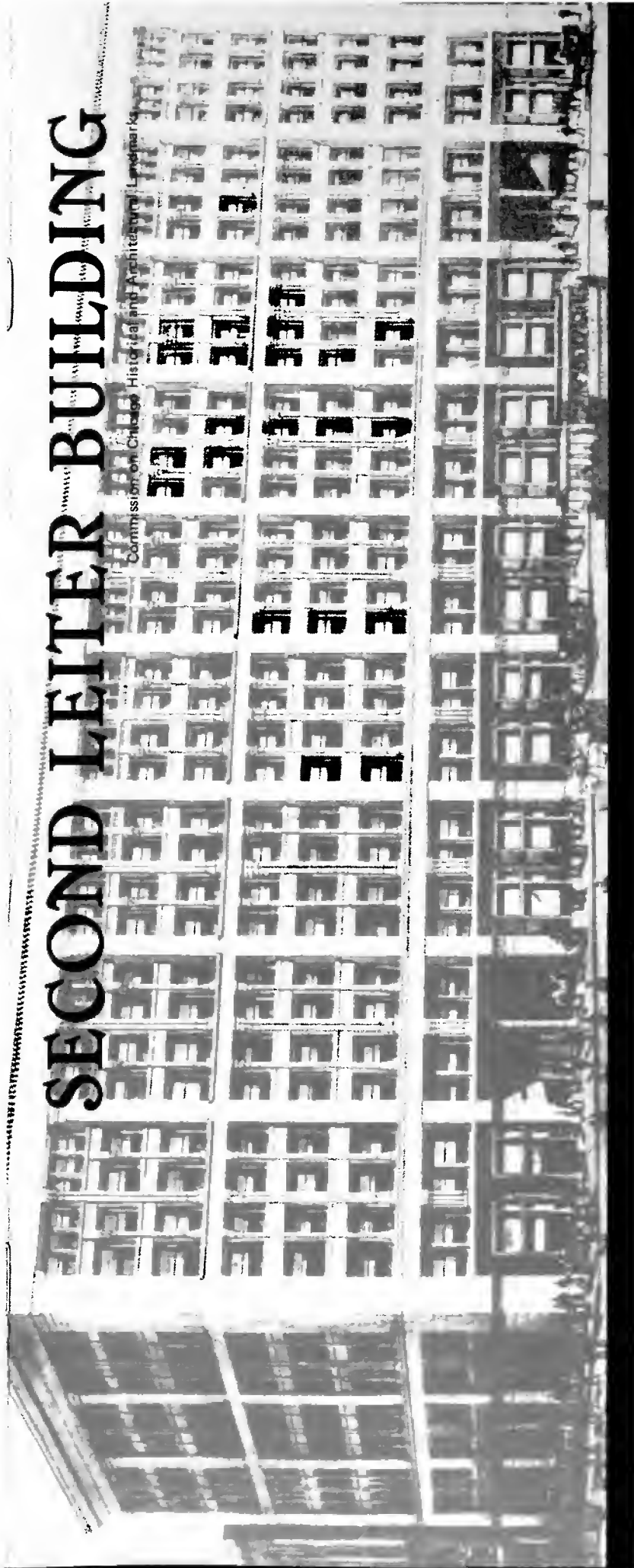
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SECOND LETTER BUILDING

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks





(Richard Nickel, photographer)

SECOND LEITER BUILDING

403 South State Street

William Le Baron Jenney, architect

Completed in 1891

Carved into the parapet of the Sears, Roebuck and Company building on State Street is the name Levi Z. Leiter. It is a reminder that the store was commissioned in 1889 by Leiter, one of Chicago's leading merchants. Although it was customary for the owner's name to appear on the facade of a store, Leiter's name undeniably deserved its prominent place. Levi Leiter, together with his architect, William Le Baron Jenney, was responsible for a building of extraordinary spaciousness, unequaled at the time. It fills the entire block on State Street from Van Buren Street to Congress Parkway and its eight stories and basement furnish floor space totaling 553,000 square feet. The Second Leiter Building, as it is now called, clearly was an accomplishment in the commercial world of Chicago. Its innovative construction and design make it an architecturally significant building as well.

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Leiter and His Architect

When the Second Leiter Building was completed, Siegel, Cooper and Company occupied the building and remained there close to seven years. They were the first of several mercantile firms to lease the building from Leiter, whose reputation was well established in the business circles of Chicago. Levi Leiter had come to Chicago in 1854 and worked with several growing retail firms. Shortly after the Civil War, Leiter and a business friend, Marshall Field, formed a partnership which dominated the dry goods establishments of Chicago. In 1881, however, Leiter sold his interest to Field who developed the firm into one of Chicago's major department stores. Levi Leiter then concentrated his attention on land development and real estate, and the Second Leiter Building, representing an investment of \$1,500,000, was one of his most successful enterprises. Although Leiter died in 1905, the building remained a part of his estate until 1931 when it was leased by Sears, Roebuck and Company, which had been founded in 1886 by Alvah Roebuck and Richard Sears.

It was the intention of Leiter that his building "be one great retail store, as complete and perfect in all its appointments as the resources of modern science and art can make it..." The *Inland Architect* of August 1889 goes on to say that "should the building not be required for a single store, it is arranged so as to be readily subdivided by fireproof partitions into nine or any less number, all supplied [with heat, electricity, and hot water] from the central plant east of the alley." This announcement heralded a building that was to be remarkable in its time.

Leiter wisely chose, as his architect, William Le Baron Jenney, whose reputation was well-established. In order to meet Leiter's requirements of light, space, ventilation, and security, Jenney employed a new form of building construction, utilizing an internal metal framework, which proved to be particularly well suited to the owner's needs. Jenney had experimented with the system in two previous buildings but never before had he allowed the internal skeleton to determine the exterior characteristics of his work as he did in the Second Leiter Building.

William Le Baron Jenney was an early pioneer in the Chicago school of architecture, the commercial style that developed in Chicago in the late 1800s. Many well-known Chicago school architects began their careers in his offices: Louis H. Sullivan, William Holabird, Martin Roche, and Daniel H. Burnham. Perhaps their architecture is better known than Jenney's, for his genius was primarily that of an engineer. He was born in Fairhaven, Massachusetts in 1832. At the age of twenty-four he graduated from the *Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures* in Paris where he received his technical training. After serving under both Grant and Sherman as an engineer in the Civil War, he came to Chicago and opened an architectural office in 1868. During the next twenty years, Jenney developed the concept of steel-frame construction, whereby the weight of a building is not borne by its exterior walls, but rests instead on a framework of steel and iron. Jenney's great technological advance was accompanied by progress in the development of the Chicago school style. Closely linked to steel-frame construction, the commercial style of the Chicago school is characterized by simple lines which articulate



Levi Ziegler Leiter, pictured above, not only had extensive real estate interests in Chicago but had vast holdings in Montana ranch land as well. His non-commercial interests were centered in the Art Institute and the Chicago Historical Society. His architect, William Le Baron Jenney, pictured below, was an equally prominent Chicagoan. Jenney's technological accomplishments revolutionized building construction and significantly contributed to the development of the Chicago school of architecture. (Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



the underlying structure. It is particularly well illustrated by the Second Leiter Building.

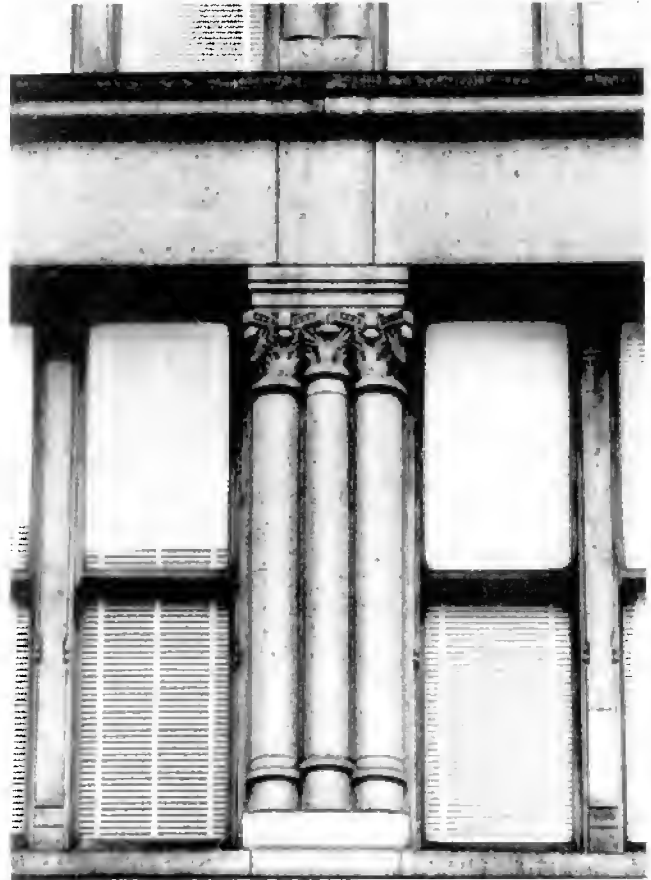
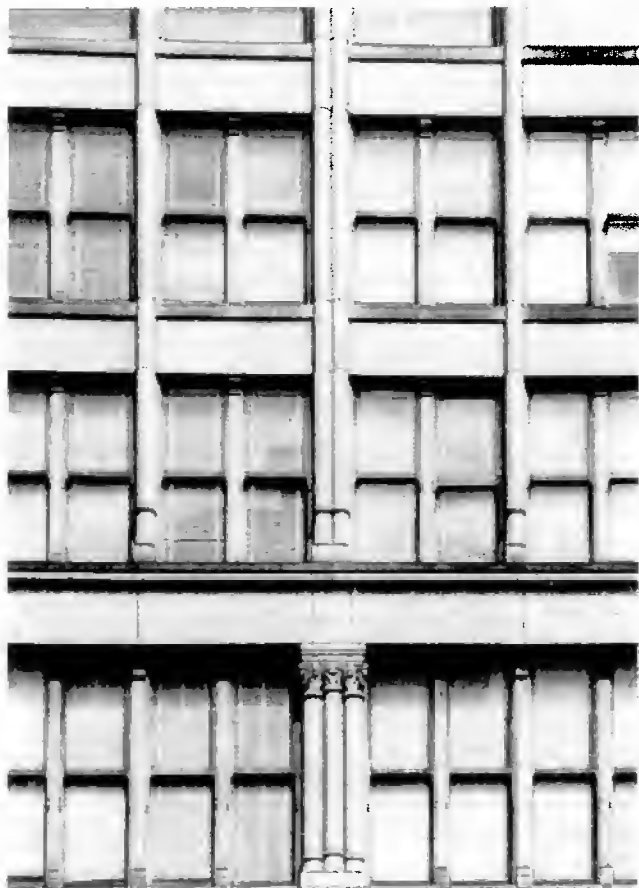
Evolution of Jenney's Architectural Techniques

The simple, direct designs of the Chicago school were prefigured in Jenney's Portland Block, built in 1872 and now demolished. Although masonry-bearing construction was used in this seven-story building, its design was less ornate than its neighbors. The flat, unadorned walls were divided uniformly by brick piers.

In 1879, Jenney produced a building which was an intermediate step between masonry and steel-frame construction. This building, which also bore Leiter's name, was torn down in 1972. It was supported in part by internal cast-iron columns and also by the masonry walls and spandrels. Its window-filled facades had very little ornamentation and its design was clean-cut, simple, and well-balanced.

The principle of complete metal framing was realized in Jenney's Home Insurance Building of 1884. This significant structure, which stood on the northeast corner of LaSalle and Adams streets until 1931, was the first in which the exterior became merely a curtain wall supported by the interior fireproofed framing. Although part of the load was supported by the party wall alongside the Home Insurance, the use of a complete internal framework marked an extremely important advance in the art of tall building construction.

The slim columns, smooth piers, and simple spandrels form a striking gridiron pattern.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

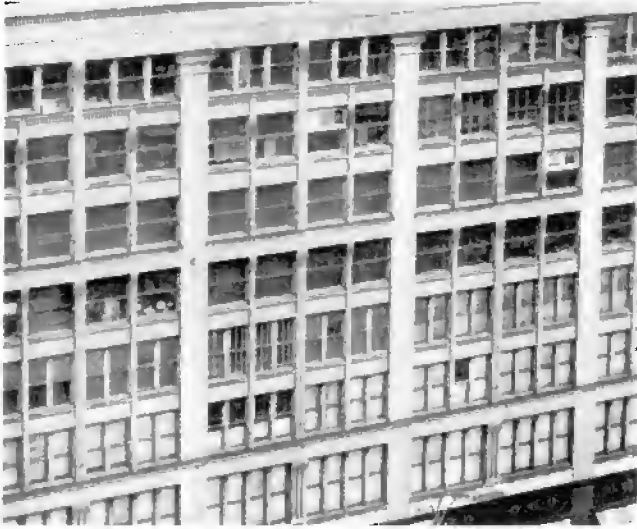


The clarity of the overall design is accented by simple detailing. Note the unusual capitals of these colonnettes.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

struction. The technical innovations of the Home Insurance Building made possible the development of the skyscraper. Without the need for heavy masonry-bearing walls, the facades could be opened up to include more window area. The internal framework was capable of supporting buildings of greater height than ever before. These engineering advances were a remarkable accomplishment, but it was not until the Second Leiter Building that Jenney found a valid and aesthetic expression for his structural triumph.

A Straightforward Design

The Second Leiter Building is grand in its proportions, yet simple and original in its design. The iron and steel frame transmits the weight of the eight stories, both walls and floors, to the foundations. The exterior expresses this substantial construction but remains light and airy, thanks to the extensive window area. The metal frame of the building determines the pattern of the facade—a bold composition of large open rectangles. The prominent and continuous piers follow the metal construction beneath and divide the surface into a lattice-like pattern of nine bays on State Street and three each on Van Buren Street and on Congress Parkway. The overall grid is divided horizontally by unbroken spandrels above the second and fifth levels, and the whole is capped by a simple continuous cornice. The resulting cellular effect offers a feeling of clarity as well as



The window pattern varies slightly from floor to floor. Above, Leiter's name and the year 1891 are carved into the parapet. (Barbara Crane, photographer)

unity of structure and form. From the second through seventh stories, the square panels (two in each bay) were originally filled with two double-hung plate glass windows, separated only by slim fireproof columns. The top story varied the pattern with three windows per panel. The main piers are topped by simple classical capitals. The material of the three formal facades, smooth-dressed light gray Maine granite, complements the severe but handsome exterior. In the Second Leiter Building there is no excess detail to mar the purity of the fundamental geometric form. Jenney's treatment of this facade began a trend toward direct expression of underlying structure as a form of art.

The building was constructed under the supervision of Charles Busby who carried out the plans with all the exactitude befitting the design of an engineer. The building met the requirements of a large-scale merchandiser. The workmanship throughout is of the highest quality. It was Levi Leiter's intention to make this building one of the great commercial monuments of Chicago. Only the Carson Pirie Scott store, designed by Louis Sullivan in 1899 and designated a Chicago Landmark in 1970, can match the Second Leiter Building in its generous, unobstructed floor area.

The Second Leiter Building is of straight warehouse construction which allows for broad interior avenues of space, divided only by the slender wrought-iron columns necessary for support. The unusually wide bays and high ceilings (sixteen feet) add to this feeling of spaciousness. The basement was left entirely free for tenant use by locating the boilers and machinery in the basement of a nearby building. This arrangement, creating maximum usable space, made the Second Leiter Building particularly suitable for one great establishment. Or, it could be divided if there were more than one tenant. According to the original plan, any story could be rented independently and could be reached conveniently by stairs and elevators opposite the State Street entrances of the building. These facilities, plus its proximity to public transportation (the "El") and a prime

location on the most important shopping thoroughfare of the time, made the store one of the finest retail buildings in the world. This important architectural and commercial milestone was constructed at a high point in Jenney's career. Between 1889 and 1891, Jenney received the majority of his most important commissions.

Jenney's Later Work

After the Second Leiter Building, Jenney continued to develop and refine the technology of steel-frame construction. The Fair Store at State and Adams streets, which Jenney designed in 1890 and which is now occupied by Montgomery Ward and Company, also employed this new method of construction. However, its facade did not express the underlying structure as dramatically as that of the Second Leiter Building. Today the Montgomery Ward Store has been completely remodeled.

The Manhattan Building, a sixteen-story office structure at 431 South Dearborn Street, was completed in 1891, the same year as the Second Leiter Building. Here Jenney experimented with the techniques of wind bracing and cantilevering. In the Manhattan Jenney relied on the window

Although much of the interior has been remodelled, the ornamental grillwork on the staircases has been retained. (C. Robinson for the Historic American Building Survey)





Sears, Roebuck and Company has recently cleaned and renovated the Second Leiter Building, insuring its prominence on State Street. (Barbara Crane, photographer)

openings, which varied according to the source of light, to determine the design of the facade. After 1893, Jenney's work was influenced by the historically derived styles fostered by the Columbian Exposition of that year, and the refreshing boldness of his earlier designs gave way to Beaux Art Classicism.

Today's Sears, Roebuck and Company Store

Although several alterations have been made to the Second Leiter Building, it remains a huge retail store as it was intended. In 1940, prior to the construction of the State Street subway, additional foundations of caissons were imbedded under the west wall of the building. In conjunction with the widening of Congress Street in the early 1950s, the bays on the south facade were opened at ground level creating an outdoor arcade for pedestrians. The interior areas have been extensively remodeled, but the exterior retains the characteristic for which the building is so important: the correlation between the underlying structure and its clear expression in the design of the facade. Jenney's contemporaries recognized the building's significance, its originality, and its purity. Today its architectural integrity has been underscored by the renovation program recently completed by Sears, Roebuck and Company. The Second Leiter Building is undeniably a monument on Chicago's State Street, just as Levi Leiter had intended.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.